DAVID ADJAYE HOUSES
RECYCLINGRECONFIGURING REBUILDING
Edited by Peter Allison

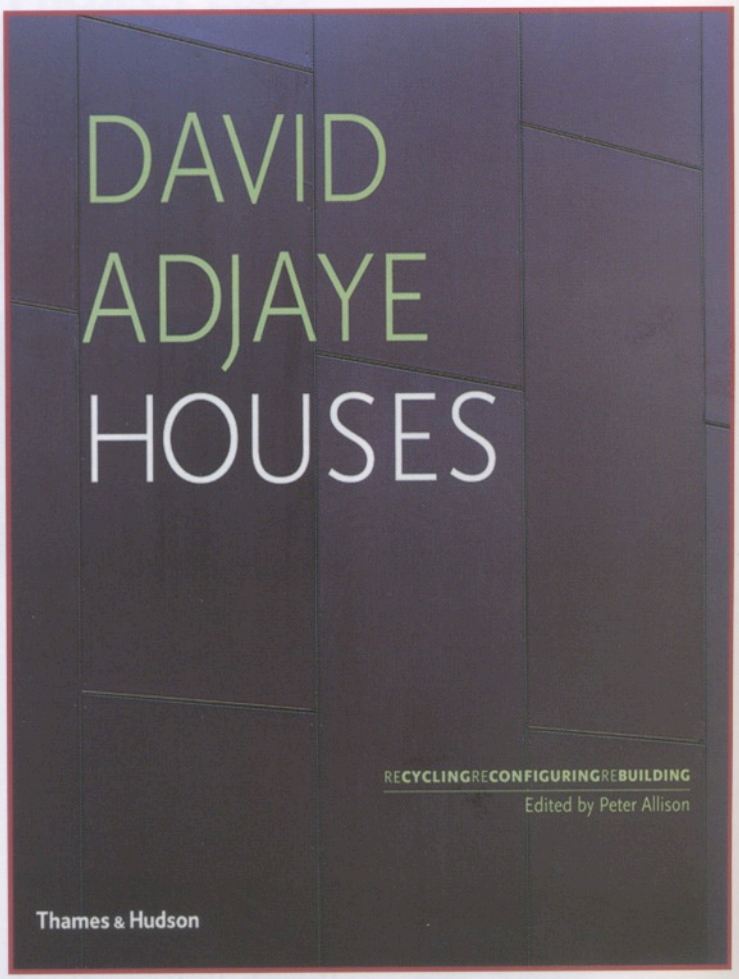
Debate about the David Adjaye 'publicity machine' has featured recently in the architectural press. With the architect's work published in almost every conceivable magazine and newspaper, it seems for some, saturation point has been reached. But with the list of media references continuing to increase at an exponential rate, David Adjaye is impossible to ignore.

Noticeably missing from the new Thames and Hudson book on Adjaye, is a bibliography. Perhaps sensitive to the quantity of media outpourings, we are offered a monograph on his house projects, that direct us back to the architecture and away from the media aura.

Adjaye has made no secret of the fact he believes it necessary to cultivate a media 'personality.' With 40 staff and projects rapidly increasing in scale, the energy invested with the media is beginning to pay off.

The publicity has been used, not only to promote his own work, but also to challenge opinions on architecture. In a Guardian article he described architecture as "...the most closed, middle-class, middle-aged, trust fund profession you could be in..." Perhaps this is why CABE turned to Adjaye to design their offices: to shake off something of those preconceptions.

Born in Tanzania, the son of a diplomat, Adjaye has travelled extensively, moving between different cultures. He has studied in Japan - which he cites as a strong influence- as well as working in the offices of David Chipperfield and Eduardo Souto de Moura -with whom his work has a strong affinity.
Adjaye first opened an office with William Russell in London where together for six years they completed



a series of well known projects, such as the 'Soba Noodle Bar', 'Lunch@' and 'The Social'. Adjaye/Associates was formed in 2000.

The projects shown in this book mark a critical stage in David Adjaye's career. Assembled around the theme of 'houses' they range from a small garden shed for a potter in Streatham to a luxurious penthouse apartment in Kensington. Film stars, fashion designers and artists make up some of Adjaye's recent clients.

As larger public buildings -such as the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art and the Idea Stores in London- make up much of his current workload he is moving away from the domestic projects that have shaped his reputation. This book publishes together for the first time the complete range of Adjaye's house projects.

The book's cover - subtly embossed with the pattern of plywood joints- shows the façade of the 'Elektra house', which was the first project to draw attention to his work. The famous image of the blank façade (made of phenolic resin plywood sheets) was too much for some. It was even to induce the wrath of the RIBA Journal reader's page. 'Fraught' with concerns of "material detail issues" and "urban manners" the letters helped to push the house into controversy. Adjaye, had broken the rules.

Much misunderstood at the time, the 'Elektra house' can now be contextualised within the oeuvre of Adjaye's other projects. Constructed for a modest budget of £80 000 for a young couple who were both artist, its blankness was necessitated by their need for maximum wall space. While the outside -like many of Adjaye's projects- is dark and opaque, the inside reveals a spacious luminous white box. Light slots and large areas of glazing to the back, flood the house with light and create contrasting areas to live and work, in what is a relatively small area of 110 m2.

This project revealed Adjaye to be a consummate manipulator of space, materials and light. The simple, but technically difficult detailing and palate of materials threw the emphasis on the project, back to that of space and use rather than that of an 'object.'

'Elektra House' marked a shift away from transparency -much favoured at

▶ the time- becoming instead, more of a mask to what was within. The blankness to the street, and the reorientation to the backlands and sky give a different sense of 'identity' in the city. Adjaye's diverse interests in such things as, earth textures, boarded up buildings and a sense of Japanese interest in shadows, were turned to good use in this small but inventive project.

Few of Adjaye's other projects have had such minimum budgets. The simple pottery shed -which is clad in black profiled board- built in a garden in Streatham, is also the exception. It is a simple tube like space. Lined with plywood and glazed at either end, it relates to some of Adjaye's installations such as the 'L x W x H' and the 'Asymmetric Chamber.' Minimal structures which feel like long lenses, they have in common a distinctive feeling of compressed perspective and linear space.

With the larger programmes and higher budgets the projects become more technically sophisticated. The 'Fog House' in Clerkenwell is a strata of space, organised vertically, and cantilevering out from the existing brick shell.

The 'Dirty House' in Shoreditch is organised around an open plan living space that floats over two very large studio spaces amidst an industrial part of London.

The 'Lost House' at Kings Cross is a dark and mysterious interior. It has an almost aqueous feel with its lap pool, reflecting pool and rippling resin floor. This project is strangely surreal in its mixture of rich colours and contrasting dark materials. The long thin building -originally a passageway- forms different layers of materials and parallel spaces around a network of paths. The larger budget is used here skilfully by Adjaye to create a rich and complex sequence of spaces.

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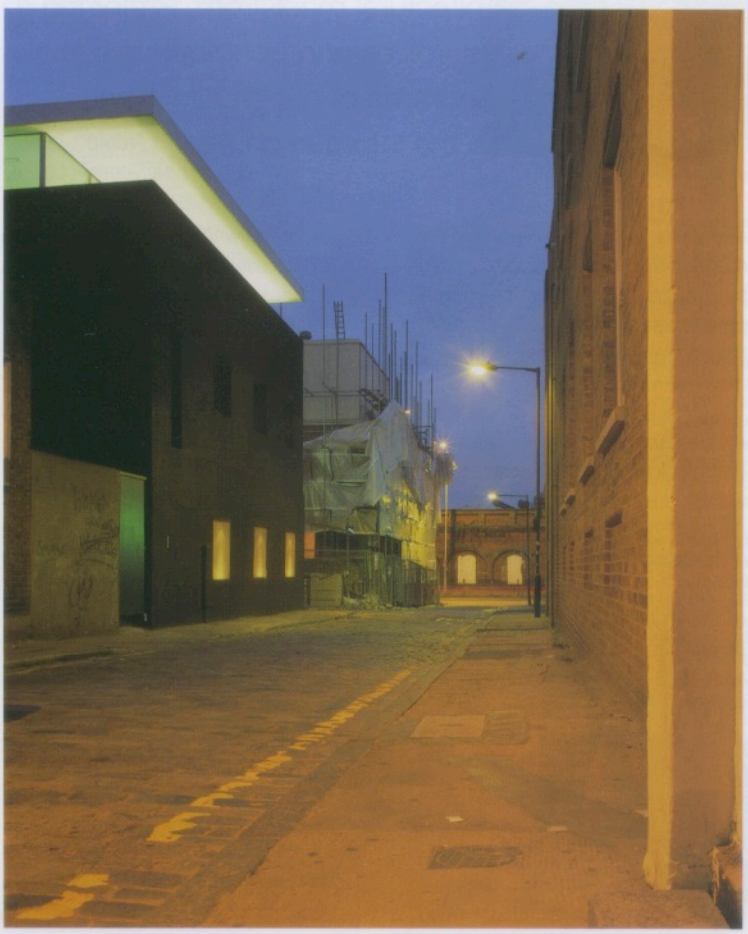
Sometimes the ideas are direct and essentially simple. The project for a suburban garden wall at Dulwich uses rust introduced into the concrete mix to give a rich earthen texture and colour that encloses a zen like space in suburbia.



My own favourite, the 'Swarovski House', is a 'raumplan' of interlocking spaces, using the midwall as a staircase to offset the floor levels and relate the house back to the basement garden. Timber wraps around the inner walls and ceilings and opens up as shutters to reveal space, before folding to become a kitchen. This terrace house is transformed into a hidden, dreamlike, wooden tower house, encased within the brick walls, before emerging at the roof level into a landscape of chimney pots.

As each project is introduced in the book, a page of Adjaye's sketches sum up the intentions. Cryptograms of thought, they can be 'decoded' by carefully studying the plans, sections and photographs. Technically well crafted, the intention of each house project is essentially the same: to open up a sequence of spaces and relationships and to relate that sequence to the garden or outdoor space. This is where Adjaye is essentially the modernist, but with Japanese influences.

The book is laced with various short but evocative essays written by Stuart Hall, Peter Allison, Caroline Roux and Deyan Sudjic. Caroline Roux best touches the spirit of Adjaye's work by revealing something of the working dialogue established with the artist Chris Ofili and the completion of his house in Spitalfields. Ofili's work, and almost semi reclusive lifestyle, and Adjaye's approach to the design of the house, is a meeting of architect and artist in a dialogue of unique understanding, "...like a child creating a parallel universe beneath the dinning table" as Roux describes.

While some may choose to criticise David Adjaye for his media savvy, what this book reveals is an architect deeply interested in the poetics of space. ●

Paul Clarke

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